Gender Differences Associated with Playing High School Varsity Soccer

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Despite the increased participation of girls in competitive high school athletics, it is unclear that play on sports teams holds the same meaning for adolescent boys and girls. This study investigated school, grade, (freshman and sophomore vs junior and senior), and gender differences associated with a range of factors related to participation in high school varsity soccer play among 65 students attending two high schools, one emphasizing achievement, the other emphasizing competitive involvement in athletics, including soccer. Also of interest was the relationship between both soccer involvement and soccer knowledge and school climate, empathy, occupational interest, and perceived parent behavior. Because gender differences were found in comparative and correlational analysis, it is concluded that play on varsity soccer teams holds different meanings and values for adolescent boys and girls.

INTRODUCTION

The significance of children's play and games has been attributed to their impact on symbolism, language, intellectual abstraction, coping with anxie-
ty and conflict, social skills, perspective taking, problem solving, and creativity (Christie and Johnsen, 1983). Theories of play reflect this diversity (Fein, 1981; Herron and Sutton-Smith, 1971; Rubin et al., 1983). For example, El'Konin emphasizes the social determination of play, Piaget ties play to the development of symbolic thought, and Sutton-Smith stresses the expressive and self-representative aspects of play (Rubin et al., 1983).

Although theories have emphasized different aspects of play, there is a consensus that play serves important functions in the socialization process. These include providing opportunities to learn rules of reciprocity in social interaction, and to sharpen communication and social cognitive skills; providing a context within which to learn acceptable ways of expressing emotions; furthering cognitive development and creativity through pretend play; shaping achievement behavior by encouraging effort, persistence, and delay of gratification; teaching subroutines of action that may later be applied to solve problems or to enact adult social roles; and providing a setting within which mutually satisfying peer relationships are developed and maintained (Perry and Bussey, 1984; Roberts, 1984).

Despite the importance attributed to play, its study has received uneven treatment across developmental stages. While descriptive data on play in infancy and childhood are extensive (Christie and Johnsen, 1983; Fein, 1981; Garvey, 1977; Rubin et al., 1983), the nature and function of play in adolescence has received limited attention. For example, a recent compendium of research on adolescence (Adelson, 1980) had no chapter on play and does not even list “play” as an entry in the “subject index.”

The relative neglect of play in adolescence is surprising given evidence that it serves important functions in adolescence. In a recent study of 75 high school students, Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) gathered students’ self-reports of their feelings, thoughts, and activities during 40–50 randomly selected moments of each day for a one-week period. Students were found to spend an average of 42 hours per week (40% of their total time) engaged in leisure activities, with participation in sports and games accounting for 3.4% of their time. Boys spent about six hours per week on sports and games, while girls spent about half this amount of time in these activities. Finally, the most intrinsically rewarding leisure activities were highly structured activities (such as sports, hobbies, and art).

The striking gender difference reported by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) is consistent with other work suggesting that play and games are part of a differential socialization process for boys and girls (Carpenter, 1983; Rubin et al., 1983).

First, through simple role play in early childhood, boys and girls develop characteristically aggressive (boys) or dependent (girls) roles in play. Later, children participate in a wide range of spontaneously organized games and activities. The past times of elementary and secondary school age children